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## CAUSES OF THE ALARMING RISE OF FALSE SEXUAL ALLEGATIONS AGAINST TEACHERS IN SOUTH AFRICAN SCHOOLS

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**Abstract.** False sexual allegations against teachers have contributed to teachers leaving the profession early and a decline in males choosing the profession. The main focus of this study was to investigate learners' false allegations of sexual misconduct against teachers. This study was underpinned by Fabricated Rape Theory and adopted qualitative methodology data through semi-structured interviews. Four teachers, one deputy principal, and one principal making six participants in the South district of the Gauteng province of South Africa were selected using convenient selection methods. The collected data were analysed using the Thematic Analysis method, which enables the researcher to respond to the study's objectives one after the other. The study revealed that fear, emotional neglect, and revenge contribute to false sexual allegations against teachers and that the maintenance of professional conduct among teachers and policy change are the possible solutions. Therefore, the study recommends that students should be provided with adequate orientation and re-orientation about the implication of false allegations, that teachers should always maintain good conduct, and that there should be an improvement in school policies and code of conduct to include punishable consequences for false accusations.

Keywords: Sexual allegations; teachers; learners; schools

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### I. INTRODUCTION

Majority of teachers have faced allegations of misconduct in the past few years, and such has impacted teachers and school staff, resulting in them wanting to quit their jobs after being falsely accused by learners because they cannot cope with the stigma. Teachers are somehow scared to enforce discipline and assert their authority over learners because experiences and observations show that learners try to avenge themselves by accusing teachers of inappropriate conduct. This attitude has been linked to poor parenting by learners who think they must revenge any teacher's attempt to discipline them, which has impacted the rise of innocent teachers accused of sexual misconduct (ATL, 2015). Another challenge has been linked to the stipulations of section 28(2) of the constitution of South Africa, which states that a child's best interests are of paramount importance in every matter concerning the child (South African Government, 2017), as much as the children's rights must be taken into consideration when they are reporting incidents of misconduct that the teachers have done. Unfortunately, there seems to be one-

sidedness in implementing the constitution, which seems to have neglected the protection of teachers and other stakeholders in schools.

For instance, a female teacher at Orkney High School was accused of indecent assault of a fifteen-year-old schoolboy. The learner accused his teacher of playing with his genitals and having sex with him on a desk in the classroom. The court found the teacher not guilty due to a lack of evidence. Even though the court found her not guilty (News24, 2008), a March 2015 article for the *Independent* education survey indicated that one in five teachers had experienced a false accusation by learners and parents or family friends (Rawlinson, 2017). Limitless to South African Schools, the information provided by the Association of Teachers and Lecturers (ATL) in the United States of America shows that more than 22 percent of college and school staff had been the target of false allegations by the learners and the learners' parents or family- friends (Garner, 2015). Learners made allegations because they do not like being told what to do by the college or school staff, which exhibits poor parental discipline.

The relevant stakeholders in the education system continue to fail to act swiftly when such allegations are made, resulting in people no longer wanting to choose teaching as a profession. According to Caroline Winter (in ABC News, 5 May 2014), the Australian Education Union (AEU) lately, young men are running away from teaching as a career option because they are afraid of being wrongly accused of child sex offences. The AEU further elaborated that there has been a massive decline in male teachers in schools for some years now. The staff unions also lament that in the past 20 to 30 years ago, teachers were not at risk of false accusations and inappropriate acts, but all that has changed in the recent time.

Anderson and Levine (1999) note that the rise in the number of concerns about the allegations of sexual assault against teachers in the teaching environment has resulted in teachers being afraid of sexual abuse allegations. Thus, teachers are advised to limit contact with learners, which will lead to adverse consequences for learners and the teaching environment. Furthermore, the working environment becomes unbearable even for the best teachers because they are constantly aware that they are at risk of being unjustly accused of such offences by learners. As a result, some teachers are considering quitting the profession despite not being accused, but the fear that it might happen has led to them making such decisions. Strauss (2015) opines that as false sexual allegations against teachers continue to rise, more educators will start to leave the profession. Thus, the shortage of teachers will continue to increase as teachers are afraid they are next in line. This is to argue that as long as learners' right is important, so are the teachers. However, the rights of the alleged accused are equally important; the current policies and laws leave troubling questions about creating the proper balance between the rights of the accused harasser and the alleged victim.

### **Problem Statement**

There is a significant concern among teachers about the likelihood of being falsely accused by students in South African schools. However, little attention is being given to such issues and there is little understanding of the severity of such allegations (Black & Schweitzer, 2012). The problem with this study is that the Department of Basic Education (DBE) and schools, in general, tend to focus mostly on learners' rights and how such incidents affect them. However, the two stakeholders fail to protect teachers, and they fail to ensure that an investigation has been done thoroughly before they disclose the identities of teachers whom the complaint has been lodged against. The right to privacy of the teachers is being violated during such investigations; so much information about sexual misconduct involving teachers is being disclosed to the community and media at large about the teacher while the investigation is underway, whereas when it comes to the learner, the DBE and schools will not disclose any information because he/she is a minor. The concerned stakeholders seem to have no interest in understanding the motive that is mostly hidden behind sexual allegations made by most learners. This agrees with Robinson (2015) that the false allegations of sexual abuse of children are not usually

made out of good faith, but rather the accusations are mostly vindictive. Hence, teachers risk losing everything, including their dignity, integrity, and psychological implication, when these allegations are made by learners, regardless of whether they are proven correct.

The researchers' observations in the schools show that schools do not appoint male teachers to teach physical education (PE) because they are scared of being falsely accused of sexual assault, mostly by female students. Hence, even if the PE teacher has taken some time off from work, students will be left unattended, or another female teacher will be asked to substitute the absent teacher. Moreover, male teachers are scared of teaching this subject because they are the ones who are most vulnerable to such allegations. Hence, leaving a huge vacuum in schools.

### **Research Objectives**

Based on this problem, the study formulated the following objectives to guide the study:

- To identify the factors contributing to the allegation of sexual misconduct against teachers by learners.
- To explore possible solutions to the problem of false allegations.

### **Theoretical Framework**

This study adopted the theory of Fabricated Rape proposed by De Zutter, Horselenberg, and Van Koppen based on the literature on false sexual allegations (De Zutter *et al.*, 2016). The purpose of this theory is to assist in predicting how false allegations will bolster detectable differences with true rape allegations based on the principle that a complainant that has not been raped will have to fabricate a story, whereas a true victim's story is based on recollections of the event. This theorist argued that the first false complaints are lying, and they will behave as liars. If they present stories that are not similar to the stories that truth-tellers present, they will construct a story based on their sexual experiences, which may be situationally different from the truth and imaginary reality. False complaints, according to De Zutter *et al.* (2016), false accusers make up a story based on their own beliefs concerning rape; if their beliefs about rape are invalid, then an invalid story of rape will be constructed. Thus, a false complaint has to rely on mental representations of how such an event would occur; these mental representations are mainly based on how the news in the media portrays what rape is, often such representations often lack details (Greer, 2003). Therefore, the false complaints make up a concise story with few details (De Zutter *et al.*, 2016).

This theory is relevant to this study because it helps schools' stakeholders, both students, and teachers, most especially those who conduct the investigations of sexual misconduct, such as social services, school officials, and law enforcement, to be able to distinguish between true and false sexual allegations against teachers, students and any persons within the school. This, if implemented in schools, will reorientate learners against false sexual allegations against teachers and or any victims. This will not only promote decency among the stakeholders but also control false

allegations of any kind against one another in schools. The understanding of this theory is also a pointer for a thorough investigation of allegations before official declaration of such to avoid devastating professional and personal consequences on the falsely alleged person.

## II. METHODS

A qualitative research approach was deemed to be suitable for this study as it is not interested in gathering data from statistics but rather focuses on analysing people's lives, behaviours, lived experiences, feelings, social production of issues, practices, and events (Flick, 2018; Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Also, it helps the researcher to understand peoples' perceptions and experiences about the social and cultural context they live in. Data was collected by using semi-structured interviews. The study involved six participants which comprised principals and teachers of the Department of Basic Education, all from the South District in the Gauteng Province, South Africa, four teachers, one deputy principal, and one principal. Purposive sampling method was used to select the six participants. This method was deemed appropriate because the selected participants are relevant to share their views and no other person could present them since they are the ones facing the identified problem (Creswell & Clark, 2011). The data collected via interviews were analysed using Braun and Clarke's seven steps of thematic analysis. According to Braun and Clarke (2006), these seven steps involved transcription; defining and naming themes, and finalising the analysis. This thematic analysis is relevant to this study because it enables the researcher to categorise the data based on the study's objectives with appropriate interpretation (Omodan, 2022).

This study was approved by the Research Committee of the University of the Free State. The anonymity, confidentiality, freedom, and respect of the participants were observed (Okeke, Omodan & Dube, 2022). This is also in line with Resnik (2015) that researchers must follow ethical rules to ensure accountability, trust, fairness, and mutual respect. In addition, the participants were given pseudonyms, as indicated in the below analysis. For example, all the participants were given SST1, SST2, SST3, SST4, SST5, and SST6.

## III. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

In order to address the objectives of the study, the analysis below was made. This was done thematically based on objectives 1 and 2. To fulfil objective one, the data identified that fear emotional neglect, and revenge contribute to the prevalence of false sexual allegations against teachers. In answer to objective two, which was to present the possible solutions to the problem, the study came up with a theme tagged; maintenance of professional conduct and relationships. The themes are addressed below.

### **Fear and emotional neglect, and revenge as the contributing factors**

The factors contributing to the false sexual allegations against teachers in schools are critical and need to be addressed to save innocent teachers who are diligent in their

teaching and professional conduct. The issues of false sexual allegation have been confirmed in schools and the data collected shows that students use to alleged teachers based on their fear of the unknown and as an act of revenge against teachers who disciplined the learners. See the participants' statements below:

*SST1: "I have experienced an instance where a female learner has broken a school rule and, fearing punishment and the anger of her parents, she acted first by accusing the male teacher (who reprimanded her for her transgression) of sexual harassment. She accused the teacher of having touched her behind in a sexual manner. In the hearing, witnesses testified that the teacher was reaching for a cell phone, which she grabbed out of his hand after he confiscated it during a lesson and hid it behind her back. The teacher had insomnia for months afterwards."*

*SST2: "A girl learner who performed very poorly in a subject was too scared to face her parents with her poor results. Instead of taking her report card home, she told her parents that her teacher was sexually harassing her in class by making lewd remarks about her breasts. She claimed that she could not concentrate in his class. A full investigation proved that the learner was lying and that the teacher had never addressed her about matters other than schoolwork. As a result, the teacher had a nervous breakdown."*

*SST3: "Young male novice teachers are always victims when they begin their careers as female students want to pursue romantic relationships and, in some cases, teachers do not agree with that. The female student throws sexual allegations. Furthermore, work dynamics in some cases force some educators to use pupils as tools for getting money from their colleagues. In this process, the instigator promises the learner a huge payout if they become involved in this process. In addition, colleagues try to ruin another colleague's reputation because of jealousy and sometimes anger shared towards their colleague."*

*SST5: I will speak from my own experience; a grade 12 learner wrote a letter to the principal accusing me of sexual misconduct after kicking her and her friends out of my classroom because they bunked my classes several times. Two things saved me. Firstly, the witnesses she had were all telling a different story which made the learner's accusation unbelievable. Secondly, the learners wanted to speak to the principal and beat up this learner for lying. The learner and her friends planned this because they wanted revenge for the punishment I had given them.*

*SST6: I have seen jealousy amongst peers who have not been favoured in such cases and it can very quickly escalate into a false charge of sexual harassment against the teacher. Some teachers feel they can safely counsel learners alone in a classroom with no witnesses present, which is never wise. Such circumstances could also create jealousy in peers or cause the learner who is being counselled to fall in love.*

From the above statement by SST1, one could see the ploy that students use to post sexual and misconduct allegations against their teachers to avert being punished by the teacher or their parents for their actions. In the same vein, revelations

from SST2 also showed that learners mostly throw up sexual allegations against their teachers to avert punishments or reprimands from their parents for poor performance in their academic work. The fear of the unknown, a spirit of revenge from the students, and emotional neglect surface from statements by SST3 as one of the factors that make students falsely allege their teachers have tried to gain their romantic attention without luck. The statement by SST5 also confirms that the issue of wanting revenge against teachers leads students to cook up false sexual allegations against their teachers. SST6's statements also confirm that learners are also jealous of peers who may have gained good relationships with their teachers. This makes other learners think of bringing such teachers down at all costs.

From the above analysis, it is found that several reasons that could cause false sexual allegations against teachers by students are the intention to avert punishment or being reprimanded by teachers and parents and revenge against teachers. Secondly, the lack of boundaries and unclear relationships between learners and teachers could lead to romantic pursuits between teachers and often attract jealousy from other students who may feel there is a need to bring such teachers down. This study confirms the findings and arguments that the issue of false sexual allegations is prevalent in schools (Huntington et al., 2022; Prewitt-White et al., 2022; Trocmé & Bala, 2005). This finding may be linked to state laws or the schools' management's inability to prosecute or punish the false accusers; whether the accusations are driven by misunderstanding or malice, more learners are accusing teachers because of the feelings that these learners are not punished (Behm-Lawton, 2014).

#### **Maintenance of professional conduct and policy change**

It was severally observed that learners report their teachers to authorities based on inappropriate conduct, which in most cases comes from the fact that he/she did not like the mark from an assignment, test, or overall score of the teacher's subject. Physical education teachers and coaches are particularly vulnerable to such accusations (Jill, 2019). The participants' statements below justified that teacher needs to ensure their conducts are professional.

*SST1: Teachers who are vulnerable to such accusations are the ones who are too friendly to learners. With that being said, teachers need to remain professional at all times in order for learners not to think otherwise.*

*SST6: teachers must not give learners a reason to make such allegations. If a teacher is professional, there will be no way a learner can make these accusations. Teachers should refrain from having unnecessary conversations and interactions with learners and don't make unnecessary jokes. Teachers should focus on doing their job.*

From the above statements, one can conclude that it is important for teachers to learn to keep students at a distance. They must not put themselves in a situation where there is a chance that false accusations can be made. This is supported by SST1 who holds that teachers need to remain professional to avoid wrong signals from learners, which may lead to false

allegations. SST6 believes that the solution to the problem from the teacher's perspective is that teachers should refrain from one-on-one interactions, jokes, and unclear relationships with learners, especially when no one can bear witness.

On the other hand, the issue of policy change also surfaces from the participants' statements, especially those that will provide or stipulate consequences for any accusation found untrue or false. See the statements below:

*SST3: There is a need for unbiased policy change or improvement; even if policy changes are made in South Africa, teachers will still be vulnerable to such accusations because poor leadership is already failing them.*

*SST5: The teachers' union and South African Council for Educators (SACE), the Department of Basic Education, and other relevant authorities should also protect the interest of teachers via policies that will explain the consequences of false accusations to protect the interests of teachers.*

The statements from SST5 agitated for a policy improvement that will cater to both teachers and learners without bias or favour of one against others. SST5 also called for the stakeholders in the school system to come up with a policy that will stipulate consequences for whoever is found guilty of false accusations among students.

Based on the above analysis, it was discovered that maintaining professional conduct among teachers and a policy change could reduce students' false sexual allegations against teachers. This is consistent with the argument that teachers should always discharge their duties professionally according to the school ethics and principles (Ashraf et al., 2017; Leuverink et al., 2022). Also, Johnson (2017) argues that teachers should always maintain a professional relationship with learners and must not relate with learners outside school or school activities. The finding also supports the recommendations that there is a need for a policy change to enforce discipline among schools' stakeholders, including students (Streng & Kamimura, 2015).

#### **IV. CONCLUSIONS**

The above findings show that learners are often vengeful and mischievous when punished by teachers. The fear of being punished for poor academic performance makes them accuse teachers of sexual misconduct falsely. On the other hand, we also conclude that a lack of boundaries in teachers' relationships with learners through unprofessional interactions could lead to jealous pursuits between learners. Therefore, maintaining professional conduct among teachers and a policy change where both the learners and teachers are equally protected by laws/policies is a dimension that could reduce false sexual allegations against school teachers. Based on this, the following recommendations were made:

Learners should be educated about the dangers of false accusations, most especially against teachers. Therefore, the orientation should be tailored to make students understand the danger and damage of false sexual allegations and the implication of such on the reputation, finance, and livelihood of the person.

The Department of Basic Education should endeavour to improve school policies and schools' codes of conduct to accommodate the sexual assault policy that stipulates significant implications for anyone making false accusations.

Lastly, teachers should maintain a professional style and perspective with learners, devoid of any unethical insinuations in the mind of the learners.

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